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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

State Department review completed

10 September 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Nature of the Buddhist Conflict in South Vietnam

NOTE: The following is intended to provide you some background on the Buddhist movement in South Vietnam.

1. The current Buddhist protest movement in South Vietnam has been highly political since its inception. However, in the context of Buddhist tradition, as well as of political life under the Ngo family regime, it is impossible entirely to separate Buddhist political aims from Buddhist religious motivation. And in the course of their protest campaign, many otherwise apolitical Vietnamese Buddhists were forced to the conclusion that only through a change in the regime could they win religious equality.

2. A majority of the South Vietnamese population consider themselves Buddhists in one sense or another. The Buddhist Sangha (the organized community of monks) does not share the Western concept of church-state separation and looks back to a period in Vietnamese history when Buddhists served as political, cultural, and spiritual counselors to emperors. Although this role declined well before the advent of French rule, Buddhists regard the colonial period, with its introduction of Catholicism and the privileged status accorded its adherents, as having further corrupted their religion. Growing out of this concern, a growing Buddhist revival beginning in the 1920's led to the formation in 1951 by the most important Vietnamese sect of a national Sangha body - the organization the General Association of Vietnamese Buddhists (GAVB). When Diem assumed power in South Vietnam, Buddhists probably regarded his strong Catholic orientation as unfavorable to their aspirations. (Vietnam's Mahayana Buddhists, although of a different school from the more passive Theravada Buddhists dominant in Ceylon and the rest of Southeast Asia, have established contacts with them through the new World Buddhist Fellowship.)

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3. There is no evidence that the Diem regime has curbed freedom of religion or that it carried out repression against Buddhists prior to the 8 May outburst. Nevertheless, the government's open bias toward Catholicism--evident in its official philosophy, in its official sanction of Catholic celebrations, in some of its laws, in schools, in the armed forces (Catholic Chaplains), and to some extent in its choice of more trusted officials--clearly created the impression among Buddhists of religious discrimination. The semicovered Can Lao organization, formed around a nucleus of Catholics, became the government's controlling element in the civil service and army; and many ambitious Vietnamese have come to regard conversion to Catholicism as the path to success. In a series of public ceremonies in the fall of 1959, Diem officially dedicated the entire country to the Virgin Mary. The appointment in 1961 of Diem's brother Thuc as Archbishop of Hue--a Buddhist stronghold--intensified the resentment engendered by Thuc's political influence and activities.

4. Tri Quang, the Buddhist bonze who sparked the eruption of the Buddhist protest movement in Hue on 8 May, has admitted since taking refuge in the American Embassy on 1 September that he had long been planning such a campaign. He has denied, however, deliberately instigating the violence of 8 May, which culminated in the death of eight persons during efforts of security forces to disperse a crowd. Tri Quang claims he seized on the flag issue for a showdown, having let earlier opportunities go by, and that prior to 8 May, the Buddhists would have settled for an end to religious discrimination. His statements cannot be refuted on the basis of hard information now available.

5. Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders are known to have had at least two days' notice in which to plan open protests over a government effort to apply a directive--long standing but not previously enforced on Catholics or Buddhists--concerning the display of the Buddhist flag at the 8 May celebration of Buddha's birthday. The government's charge, however, that the ensuing deaths were caused by a Viet Cong grenade rather than by ARVN troops is not borne out by eye-witness reports or the findings of US military personnel in the area.

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8. The five demands drafted by Buddhist leaders in Hue on 10 May represented a petition for both religious and political concessions, including the elimination of legal restrictions not applicable to Catholics and restitution for the 8 May victims. Whether or not the demands were politically motivated, prompt and adroit government handling of the issue probably could have averted the formation of a national Buddhist campaign. Under GAVB leadership, this campaign not only served to foster greater cohesion among the country's diffuse Buddhist following, but was supported by 13 sects represented by a recently created Intersect Committee. Two other nonparticipating sects are reportedly government-subsidized. By the time that the government reached a compromise agreement on 16 June, however, the Buddhists had developed sufficient momentum and evidence of new repressions to challenge the regime's promise of good faith.

7. There is strong evidence that the government, through its authoritarian inclinations and its concern over Viet Cong instigation or exploitation of the Buddhist issue, was disposed from the beginning to regard the Buddhist leadership as subversive and to deal with them forcefully. When it refrained from doing so, under US pressure, while stalling on concessions, the Buddhists were able to arouse public sympathy by organizing demonstrations and, ultimately, by self-immolations which, whatever their political effects, represent a sacrificial gesture compatible with the traditions of Vietnamese (Mahayana) Buddhism. Although by early August the fervor of the Buddhist movement may have been partly out of control, as claimed by the Buddhist leaders, the latter were already expanding their demands in late June; in mid-July moderate Buddhist clergy were expressing alarm over the political aims of extremists in the movement. There is almost no question that Tri Quang and others were actively organizing, whether from the outset or as a result of frustrations encountered during the campaign, a vehicle to bring about the government's overthrow, though they do not appear to have cooperated with Diem's traditional political opponents.

8. The government has claimed it has proof of Communist direction of the Buddhist campaign, but officials privately admit there is little hard evidence of this, other than Viet Cong directives to exploit the issue.

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[redacted] Quang himself claims that, despite personal antipathy to Diem, he initially accepted the President as a strong anti-Communist leader; it was only later that he concluded that Diem could not win the war and that the Buddhists were caught between the evils of the regime and of the Viet Cong. Quang, however, is politically sophisticated and somewhat devious in his approach. [redacted]

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